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Story in Brief

Flying Fortresses: Democrats Want Missile Defenses On U.S. Passenger Jets

When missiles come after them, combat jets spew metal chaff and heat flares to throw them off course. Now, in the wake of the near-downing of an Israeli charter jet by a shoulder-launched missile in Kenya, two Capitol Hill Democrats think U.S. commercial jets should have the same capability.

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Flying Fortresses: Democrats Want Missile Defenses On U.S. Passenger Jets

By Jeremy Torobin, CQ Staff Writer

The Transportation Department would be required to spend \$7 billion to retrofit all existing U.S. commercial airliners with anti-missile defenses under legislation announced Wednesday.

Rep. Steve Israel, D-N.Y., was expected to introduce the bill to protect airliners, particularly from shoulder-fired terrorist missiles, in the House Wednesday. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., introduced her legislation Wednesday.

While the government would bear the cost for existing aircraft, the airlines would be responsible for equipping new aircraft with missile-evading technologies.

The bill would require airlines to start installing the defensive gear by the end of this year, with the Department of Transportation giving Congress a progress report by Jan. 1, 2004, and each July and January thereafter.

In the meantime, Israel and Boxer are calling on the Bush administration to use Coast Guard and National Guard units to patrol airport perimeters to prevent attacks.

Several prominent Democrats, including Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, former Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Bob Graham of Florida, and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, also have called for tighter perimeter controls.

In December, Clinton wrote then-Homeland Security Secretary-designate Tom Ridge urging him to "develop an action plan as soon as possible to address the potential threat to U.S. airliners by shoulder-fired missiles."

Federal government officials have reportedly stepped up efforts to find ways to protect commercial jets from surface-to-air missiles since last November, when terrorists armed with a shoulder-fired missile tried to down an Israeli charter plane as it took off from an airport in Kenya.

A task force that includes the National Security Council, the White House Office of Homeland Security, the FBI, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and other agencies is looking at various options, including technological countermeasures.

The level of support Israel and Boxer will receive from their House and Senate colleagues was unclear Wednesday.

Sen. Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., will cosponsor Boxer's bill in the Senate, but the Republican response was tepid.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said at a hearing on the TSA's efforts to overhaul aviation security (PL 107-71), that Congress should do all it can to help the administration secure passenger air travel.

But he said lawmakers must rely on TSA's "expertise" in assessing the "cost and risk" associated with equipping airliners with missile defenses.

Theoretically at least, equipping civilian passenger airliners with sophisticated systems to deploy chaff or heat flares to divert enemy missiles is easy.

And with the government footing the bill for the airline industry's existing fleet — at a likely cost of \$1 million to \$3 million per plane — the nation's cash-strapped airlines are less likely to resist.

Practically speaking, however, many experts wonder whether such measures, used on dart-like military fighter jets as well as military transports that resemble lumbering passenger airliners, would be effective.

A federal government report released two days before the Kenya incident raised questions about the systems used by the Pentagon to protect military jets. The General Accounting Office (GAO), Congress's investigative arm, warned those systems have shown "serious reliability problems."

In addition, John Mazon, a spokesman for the influential Air Line Pilots Association, has warned that even if the government mandated that airlines install protective systems on all planes, the certification and testing process would be exhaustive and could detract from more immediate safety concerns.

One factor weighing in favor of the Israel-Boxer proposal is the low-cost and easy availability of shoulder-fired missiles.

During the 1990s, the CIA spent millions in the world's underground weapons market to buy back shoulder-fired Stingers that it had given to Islamist guerrillas fighting the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan — including Osama bin Laden.

But its effort to buy back the missiles was not considered a success — terrorists simply offered the arms dealers more money, according to news accounts at the

time.

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